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Ethnic and Panethnic Asian American Identities: Contradictory Perceptions of Cambodian Students in Urban Schools

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Abstract This article examined the various ethnic identities of Cambodian students, a group often perceived by the larger society through the lens of the model minority stereotype but often endure low expectations from teachers and counselors in their local high schools. Our findings suggested that a Cambodian identity was often considered a stigmatized label and students identified as Cambodian were essentialized into the discourse of urban low achieving and culturally deficient minority students. Cambodian students' identities in the less selective academic programs were often quite visible to teachers. This characterization was often coupled with a panethnic representation of Asian American students in selective programs who were considered motivated and supported by advantageous home and cultural values. In these contexts, teachers preferred to discuss Cambodian students in panethnic terms, ignoring students' ethnic backgrounds, described their Cambodian students as part of their "bright Asian students" group. Overall, this study extends other works on Asian American ethnicity and panethnicity by focusing on the conflicting identities that affect the schooling of Cambodian students. These analyses complicate further the static notion of Asian American students as model minorities by emphasizing the fluid, problematic, and contextually-based nature of the construct.

Keywords Asian American identities · Cambodian (Khmer) students · Southeast Asian students · Panethnicity · Schools-within-Schools

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Introduction

Despite the group's vast heterogeneity, the discourse concerning Asian American education remains rooted in the model minority stereotype (Ng et al. 2007). This stereotype presents Asian students as academically successful due to cultural values emphasizing hard work, family, and education (Ng et al. 2007). However, the stereotype disregards and renders invisible Asian American students who are poor, who underachieve, and who leave school early. This profile is all too common among Southeast Asian students. Cambodian¹ students in the U.S. present particularly conflicting images in the research literature and in the schools. Research suggest that while Cambodian students tend to be perceived by the larger society through the lens of the model minority stereotype (Ngo and Lee 2007; Reyes 2007), they often endure low expectations from teachers and counselors in their local high schools (Chhuon et al. 2010; Um 2003). These local stereotypes cast Cambodian youth as low academic achievers, delinquents, and dropouts. The extant literature, however, has paid scant attention to these complex and contradictory representations of Cambodian students. Some research has examined these binary labels with other Southeast Asian groups. Lee (2001, 2005) for example, has studied Hmong students' racialized experiences to point out that Hmong youth have a broader range of identities than model minorities or delinquents. Lee's data examined the experiences of a relatively few Hmong students in a predominately White, middle class Midwestern high school community.

The current study explored Cambodian students' experiences in a high school with a highly diverse student population, including many Cambodian students. The investigation focused on how Cambodian high school students and institutional agents (Stanton-Salazar 2001), including teachers, counselors, and administrators, understand their ethnic identities as embedded within the structural features of their school context. In particular, we looked to students' academic assignments in a high school that was organized by the School-within-Schools (SWS) model, here referred to as "academies," as a vehicle for highlighting Cambodian students' awareness of educational inequity as well as their frustrations with the extreme binary perceptions associated with their ethnic group. SWSs refer to small learning communities in previously comprehensive high schools where all students and most teachers belong to one community (Conchas 2006; Lee and Ready 2007). The SWS model, experienced by many students of color in urban communities, is part of a growing reform movement in U.S. secondary urban education (Lee and Ready 2007). While SWSs are fairly new across the nation, there is some evidence that this model of school reorganization has defaulted to

¹ Khmer historically refers to the ethnic people that live within the political boundaries of modern-day Cambodia. Cambodian denotes an individual's nationality. However, Cambodia's population is overwhelmingly Khmer and the immigrants from Cambodia residing in the U.S. are primarily Khmer. *Cambodian* and *Khmer* will be used interchangeably throughout the study, depending upon how participants chose to identify.

familiar tracking practices that SWSs were designed to combat (Lee and Ready 2007; Ready et al. 2004).

Cambodian Students in U.S. Schools

Cambodian students in the U.S. as a group exhibit low levels of academic achievement relative to other populations. Census data revealed that over half (53.3%) of all Cambodians 25 years and older residing in the U.S. reported attainment of less than a high school education (Reeves and Bennett 2004). Moreover, only 6.9% of Cambodians in the U.S. have earned a 4-year college degree, far below the national average for Asian Americans (44%) and the total population (24%) (Reeves and Bennett 2004). Research on the school performance of Cambodian students consistently shows that Cambodian youth perform less well academically than students from other ethnic groups (Kim 2002; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Rumbaut and Ima 1988). Recent data (Portes and Rumbaut 2006) from the 10-year-long Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) revealed that nearly 40% of Cambodian and Laotian students failed to earn a high school diploma. Other Asian immigrant groups, including Chinese, Filipinos, and Vietnamese, did significantly better academically (as measured by GPA and high school graduation). Given their school performance, immigration scholars have argued that Cambodian children are at risk of assimilating into the lowest social and economic segments of American society (Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Zhou 1997).

Cambodian students' poor school achievement is often attributed to ethnic cultural traditions from the home country that may not support achievement for Cambodian youth in U.S. schools. Some scholars, for example, have noted that Cambodian cultural norms emphasize that parents should not intervene in the formal education of their children (García Coll et al. 2002; Hopkins 1996; Smith-Hefner 1999). Many studies, however, suggest that parental involvement in their children's education plays a significant role in children's academic success in U.S. schools (Epstein 1992; Jeynes 2007). Quantitative research has demonstrated that Cambodian parents tend not to have much direct involvement in their children's formal schooling. For example, investigations with second and fifth grade Cambodian, Portuguese, and Dominican immigrant students in New York City (García Coll et al. 2002) and in Rhode Island (García Coll et al. 2005) found that Cambodian families scored lowest on every parent involvement measure. Ethnographic interviews with members of the Cambodian community in the Boston area over a 2-year period (Smith-Hefner 1993) found that Cambodian parents largely preferred to defer to the teacher; parents did not intervene at their children's schools despite their expressed desires for their children to succeed. However, a critical limitation of this literature is the lack of attention to school-level explanations and their complex relationships with race, ethnicity, and identity when trying to understand Cambodian students' school achievement. While these studies have contributed to our understanding of Cambodian students as a disaggregated subgroup, our research extends this literature through an alternative

framework that examines how Cambodian students' achievement interacts with ethnic and panethnic identities at school.

Ethnic Identity, Panethnicity, and the Model Minority Stereotype

Following the social constructionist view, we define ethnic identity as the manner in which individuals identify with a particular group based on perceived cultural similarities including religion and language as well as perceptions of common political and material interests (Barth 1969; Cornell and Hartman 2007; Espiritu 1992; Omi and Winant 1994). While members construct and reconstruct their ethnic identities, boundaries are shaped in response to changing social context, making ethnic identity “a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual's self-identification and outsiders' ethnic designations...” (Nagel 1994, p. 154). Previous research on the identity dilemmas of African American youth have shown that multiple factors figure into students' identities. For example, Waters (1999) examined the experiences of Caribbean Black families in New York City. Interview data from the study revealed that immigrant students' ethnic identification was significant for their school outcomes. Parents prefer their children to maintain their unique ethnic identities and not adopt a panethnic African American identity in order to preserve cultural traditions and avoid the negative stereotypes, including poor school achievement, associated with being African American.

Some research has suggested the opposite pattern for Cambodians. An ethnic Cambodian identification may be perceived as detrimental to academic success, while a panethnic Asian identity supports a positive academic identity (Chhuon et al. 2010; Reyes 2007). It is unclear how Cambodians, whose ethnicity is obscured by a positive panethnic stereotype, might experience this dual identification in school. The contrast of negative perceptions of Cambodians and the model minority stereotype represents a critical dilemma for Cambodian adolescents' constructions of ethnic identities in school. The assertion of an Asian panethnic identity in U.S. society is inextricably bound to the model minority image that portrays Asian Americans as uniformly high achieving. As such, panethnic identification for Asian American youth might serve as both a resource and racist burden at school. Research has argued that an Asian American collective panethnicity was promoted by other ethnic movements including African American, Latino, and Native American, and has become an institutionalized aspect of the American understanding of race (Kibria 1998). This panethnic label, as linked to the model minority stereotype, appears to situate Asians somewhere above other ethnic minorities though not equal to the White majority.

Our research addressed the following research questions: How do stereotypes associated with different ethnic (Cambodian) and panethnic (Asian/Asian American) identities shape Cambodian students' interactions with teachers and peers across varying academic contexts? How do Cambodian high school students understand the contradictory images associated with their ethnic group? What are the consequences of this duality for their academic well being?

Research Site and Methods

Community and School Context

The community setting for this study is home to the largest Cambodian community in the United States. The Cambodian enclave in southern California is situated in an impoverished, diverse community (Ong and Umemoto 2000; Weinberg 1997). While European American residents comprise approximately 50% of the population in this city, the inner-city community in which this study takes place is largely made up of Cambodian, African American, and Latino families (Chan 2004). Of those Cambodians living in this community, 71% immigrated to the U.S. between 1980 and 1990, and over 50% of Cambodians residing in this area lived below the federal poverty line, with each household averaging six members (Ong and Umemoto 2000). After receiving permission from site and district administrators, the first author/primary researcher (Chhuon) relocated to this community to carry out an in-depth study of the educational experiences of Cambodian urban youth.

Comprehensive High School (CHS) is a racially and economically diverse school, and its surrounding neighborhood is home to many Cambodian families. During the 2006–2007 school year, the reported student enrollment was approximately 4,700 and 60% were eligible for the free/reduced lunch program. The school's ethnic breakdown was as follow: 27% African American, 27% Asian (including Cambodian), 26% Latino, 12% White, 6% Filipino, and 2% Pacific Islander. The move to its current School-within-Schools (SWS) structure for all students began 10 years ago, although it has had a highly selective magnet program since the mid 1970s. Each CHS student participates in one of six major school-within-school programs. Three of these programs, Excel, Commerce, and Math/Science, are considered Magnet academies (MAs) because of their selectivity based on standardized test scores and middle-school grades. MAs tend to attract students from across the district. Students not enrolled in the school's three Magnet academies must participate in one of the school's three other Schools-with-Schools Career academies (CAs). These three other SWSs are curricular themed career academies centering on the fields of Humanities, Business, and Communication. While some CA students enrolled in a Career academy because they were not admitted into a Magnet academy, most selected their program based on curricular interest and availability.

Researchers' Perspective

It is important to note that this research stems in part from our own ethnic and professional identities. For example, Chhuon is a male Cambodian American researcher who has lived the great majority of his life in the U.S. and is a product of the American public school system. Hudley, an African American female scholar, has spent much of her career investigating the influence of stereotypes on

Table 1 Distribution of Cambodian students individually interviewed at CHS

Grade level	Female/male	Magnet academies	Career academies	Total
9	1/1	1	1	2
10	8/8	7	9	16
11	10/8	7	11	18
12	9/7	8	8	16
		23	29	52

achievement motivation in ethnic minority youth.² It was particularly important for Chhuon, as the lead researcher, to regularly reflect upon how his ethnic, gender, class, and community outsider status influenced how informants reacted to him. Nevertheless, this study was approached from an *outsider within* status as we drew on our “personal and cultural biographies” as sources of understanding of our informants (Collins 1986, p. 529). We also followed Peshkin’s (1988) advice for qualitative researchers to critically examine their position vis-à-vis the subject under study. Peshkin challenged scholars to not only admit their subjectivities but to understand, attend to, and consider subjectivity as an embedded asset in their work.³

Participants and Data Sources

A number of Cambodian students ($n = 52$) drawn from the school’s various academic programs comprised the student sample. This student sample was relatively balanced by both gender and academic placement (see Table 1). Time spent in the school by the first author was advantageous for recruiting participants and familiarizing him with potential informants. In general, purposeful sampling techniques were used to recruit the appropriate range of participants. It was explained to students, teachers, and other individuals at CHS that the study sought to investigate the range of Cambodian student experiences at the school. The study was interested in Cambodian student perspectives across academic programs, gender, and achievement levels. With this understanding, youth and adults nominated other individuals whom they thought would be helpful for this research.

Those individuals who fit the study’s criteria (e.g., ethnicity, grade level, gender, academy assignment) were contacted by phone, email, and/or in person to participate in the study. Each interview, lasting approximately 75 min, was designed to more deeply understand, from various perspectives, factors that influenced Cambodian students’ academic achievement and well being in school. Overall, individual interviews were conducted with 52 Cambodian students, 15

² The second author (Hudley) played multiple roles in this study. For example, her expertise on how racial and ethnic stereotypes shape students’ schooling experiences was helpful in the initial conceptualization of this work. As well, she purposefully played a devil’s advocate role in critically questioning the research findings during the later stages of the study.

³ Chhuon’s ethnic background was certainly an asset in his relationship with Cambodian youth regardless of differences in age and educational background. Though we cannot say every student was comfortable, most seem to be. For instance, Cambodian students freely used Khmer/Cambodian terms to explain certain situations and openly shared personal anecdotes relating to culture, family, teachers, and friends.

teachers, 5 counselors, 4 administrators, 2 school psychologists, 1 librarian, and 2 teachers' aides.

All of the Cambodian student informants in this study were U.S. born but had immigrant parents. Student informants were familiar with the researcher, prior to their formal interviews, having met the researcher either in their classroom or at lunchtime through their friends. These interviews were described to potential informants simply as "a conversation with a purpose" (Marshall and Rossman 1995, p. 80). Audiotaped interviews were carried out over a six-month period in the library, classrooms, offices, and the cafeteria. A second interview was conducted when compelling issues emerged and/or important topics required clarification. However, systematic interviews were critical for making inferences about how individual students, teachers, and other significant adults conceptualize issues of ethnicity, panethnicity, and academic achievement. Through interviews, researchers may gain access into the motivation, meaning, and context of people's behaviors (Seidman 1991). An advantage of this methodology lies in its phenomenological approach to understanding individuals in their daily lives (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). These interviews were designed to highlight the perceptions of all informants by reporting their experiences as they see them.

In addition to interviews, this study collected data from demographic surveys, participant observation, and analysis of official district and school documents. Prior to each individual interview, the student informants were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire to gather information on age, grade, school, grade point average, specific academic program, family structure, U.S. generation, parental level of education, parent occupation, eligibility for free/reduced lunch, and bilingual skills. Publicly available district and school documents were also collected to better understand the specific aims and nature of the curricular tracks and academies in this district. As Marshall and Rossman (1995) noted, the review of documents represents "an unobtrusive method, one rich in portraying the values and beliefs of participants in the setting" (p. 85), and documents relating to the mission and academic programs offered at the school are ostensibly a reflection of a school's beliefs about its students.

Participant observation was conducted for most of the 2007–08 academic year. Here, particular attention was paid to the ways students discussed their academic identities, including their achievements and aspirations, across different settings. Eight months of participation observation at Comprehensive High informs this study. Approximately 4 hours a day were spent on campus three times a week during the first month of observation. Much of the first few weeks were spent on getting to know staff and becoming familiarized with the school's terrain including the library, the college center, and extra-curricular activities office; staff from these offices represented the first official points of contact with CHS. These individuals were gracious in assisting Chhuon with mundane necessities such as receiving a school identification badge, a parking permit, and the most updated school calendar. These early experiences were critical for a smooth transition into his more frequent and in-depth contact with students, teachers, and other staff. Over time, time spent at CHS became more frequent. By the beginning of the second semester observations were conducted almost daily. Classroom observations focused on students' core

academic classes across CHS's various programs. After receiving teacher permission, regular observations of English, Math, and Social Studies classes were conducted approximately twice a week. In most cases, the first author played multiple roles in these classrooms. For example, many teachers asked him to jump in on discussion, help with mundane classroom tasks, tutor students, and in one case he was asked to co-teach a unit. As well, he regularly participated in a number of school-related activities including parent-teacher conferences, afterschool programs, and athletic events.

Data Analysis

In addition to the article's authors, two trained research assistants were involved in these data analysis. Both individuals were recruited due in part to their expressed commitment to the research project. The first was a Cambodian male in his early twenties and a CHS alumnus who grew up in the community under study. His participation in this study contributed a unique insider perspective into the experiences of Cambodian youth in the area. His point of view, as shaped by first-hand experiences with racial and ethnic stereotypes and discrimination, was invaluable for a more nuanced interpretation of the themes that emerged from these data. Alternatively, the second research assistant was a community outsider and female doctoral student who identifies as ethnically Thai. Her commitment to the project related to her concerns for better understanding Southeast Asian American communities and interest in qualitative research. The insider–outsider perspectives of the research team were significant for an accurate and balanced interpretation of these data.⁴ After interviews were transcribed verbatim, interview transcripts were open coded to allow themes to emerge from the data and become aggregated into common domains (Emerson et al. 1995; Miles and Huberman 1994; Spradley 1979). Spradley (1979) describes domains as categories of objects, ideas, feelings, and events, as understood and perceived by individuals; statements were not coded unless the informant attached significant meaning to them. We sought to stay as close to the data as possible in our coding and interpretation of the interviews. Data analysis was part of an ongoing and recursive process (Marshall and Rossman 1995); therefore, while concepts derived from the literature helped to guide our initial inquiry, the emergence of other concepts during the analysis informed subsequent interviews and other data collection throughout the school-year.

After open coding, each transcript was examined for common patterns and themes to create core categories for each interview (LeCompte and Schensul 1999). This process has also been referred to as “boiling down”, a process aimed at reducing what the interviewee has said about a topic in fewer words (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Subsequent analyses examined differences between high and regular tracked students but also remained attentive to other possible factors including

⁴ The inclusion of diverse perspectives during the analysis stage enabled us to arrive much closer to the “truth” than with a single researcher (Marshall and Rossman 1995). At times, the meanings of particular statements relating to racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes were interpreted differently given team members' varying sensitivities and perspectives. When such disagreements arose, thoughtful discussion about significantly different interpretations was carried out until a consensus was reached.

gender, age, and class. Core categories were then examined in cross-case analyses to identify larger themes across informants. In the final step, core categories from all interviews were grouped and analyzed from the different perspectives of our informants in relation to the research questions. While an emphasis of this research is the perspective of its participants, data triangulation helped strengthen the reliability of these data. For example, placing side-by-side the descriptions of the school's structures and policies of teachers, counselors, and students helped ensure the accuracy and reliability of each group's accounts.

Findings

Cambodian Students at CHS: Being “Smart” versus being “Ghetto”

Consistent with previous works on Asian American student in U.S. schools, the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans was a pervasive feature of Cambodian students' experiences at CHS (Lee 2005; Louie 2004; Lew 2006). This was evident in regular conversations with a number of teachers and other institutional agents at CHS (Stanton-Salazar 2001). Stanton-Salazar (2001) argued that for many ethnic minority students, contact with institutional agents including teachers, counselors, and administrators is critical for shaping student academic beliefs and outcomes. These adults often serve as gatekeepers to important programs and resources. We found that institutional agents at CHS such as teachers and administrators believed that Cambodian students came from home backgrounds that emphasize academic achievement less than other Asian American subgroups at the school. As well, the first author/primary researcher's own academic and ethnic identity influenced how people expressed their ideas about Cambodian youth. Teachers and administrators were aware of his Cambodian heritage and his graduate student status situated him in their minds as fitting the successful high achieving Asian American stereotype. For example, adult informants would often say “know what I mean?” or “I'm sure you understand” to suggest that his pursuit of a doctorate meant that he did not fit the typical Cambodian student experience. One administrator for instance, who had taught at CHS for 10 years prior to her promotion, attempted to guess that the researcher's home experiences were guided by supportive “Asian” cultural values. She commented:

I know you're Cambodian but you're getting your Ph.D. so I bet you know what I'm talking about. Like, your parents probably put education as a priority for all of you [researcher and his siblings]. I don't see that with our Cambodians here really. So if you think about it I'm sure you see you're like the kids in [the MAs]. Those Asians are so driven and I'm pretty sure that the parents have a lot to do with that. I mean, look, they go to school, they play sports, they do council...Their parents aren't like doctors or professionals either. I don't know how else to explain it.

Like staff, Cambodian students believed that the common perceptions of Asian-background students at CHS were that they were all good students. Cambodian

students believed that societal beliefs about Asians and Asian Americans were generally positive but that these stereotypes were exacerbated in the school context. One of our Cambodian Magnet student informants, Lee,⁵ poignantly reflected on his CHS education as one characterized by unrealistic expectations because Asian American youth were perceived as “smart just because.” Lee, a senior in the Math/Science Academy, joked that “when Asian kids do bad it’s not considered normal.” He elaborated:

- Lee: I think that people in general expect Asians to be well off or at least not struggling that much. I think a lot of people think that.
- Chhuon: What do you mean by not struggling?
- Lee: Like, they think that Asians, even the ones not born here, own businesses or their parents know about college and stuff. And like “Asian-ness” in school, it’s a way bigger deal at school. Because if you’re Asian like me, you’re seen as smart. Even if you’re really not (*laughter*). You’re supposed to be like, one of the better students. Just because of stuff they see on TV and everything, probably.

Thus, school not only provided a window into societal perceptions of Asian Americans but CHS’s rigid academic hierarchy made more visible such beliefs. Though Cambodian students easily identified these stereotypes, they also refuted this monolithic view of Asian students. Lynna, a Career academy student, explained: “But when they [classmates] act stupid and say like, ‘I think all you Asians are smart’, then I’m like, ‘Dang, I feel dumb.’ I did bad on a test one day and they [other students] were like ‘You Asians should always get an A.’ I thought it was so stupid.” Cambodian students from the Career academies frequently discussed their frustration with the Asian American stereotypes that often shaped their classroom experiences, particularly for those who did not see themselves as fitting the model minority profile. Other research has indicated that students’ awareness of the ethnic stereotypes associated with their group might result in feelings of unrealistic pressures to achieve. For instance, the stress involved with fulfilling a stereotype may increase anxiety that can impair students’ performance on an exam (Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995). Moreover, trying to live up to the model minority image, as described by many of our informants, can come at a psychological cost and may also result in ethnic identity conflict (Sue and Sue 2002; Uba 1994).

Whereas Asian Americans as an aggregate ethnic group are stereotyped as high academic achievers, a less flattering image of Cambodians at CHS and in the community was consistently discussed by students. Cambodian students were generally described as poor, welfare dependent, and involved in gangs. In comparing Cambodian and other Asian students at the school, one Magnet administrator asserted:

Well, I think we feel that Asian students are good students. I do know that there are Cambodian gangs that people should be aware of. There is a lot of that going on around this area between the Blacks, Hispanics, and *these*

⁵ All participant names and places are pseudonyms.

Asians. So it's not like the Japanese and Chinese, you know? The Japanese and Chinese ethnic groups are generally thought to be very, you know excellent students, because they have the expectations at home and that kind of stuff. (Mrs. Jamison, Director of Commerce Academy)

Similar to most staff members interviewed, Mrs. Jamison differentiated Cambodians from other Asians at the school. The typical discourse about Cambodian students tended to be in relation to the more positive image of East Asian-background students at CHS. Discussions about “these Asians” (i.e., Cambodians) were often situated alongside the achievements of Chinese American, Japanese American, and Korean American students. Thus, East Asian-background students almost always served as a reference point for discussing Cambodian students. For example, Brenda, a Magnet student, juxtaposed the view of Cambodians with “other Asians” in this way:

Like, the other Asian ethnicities, they're more advanced. We're use to living in the ghetto. Well most of the Cambodians here....and most of us, like especially guys and stuff they're like poor and into crime and stuff like that. But then it's different from other Asians, like Koreans, they're more into school and more concentrated on it...

“Ghetto,” a term referring to poor inner city neighborhoods as well as behaviors associated with inner city poverty, was often used to describe where Cambodians lived and how they behaved in the community. While Brenda referred to Koreans specifically, Cambodian students' mention of “other Asian” referred to East Asian-background students including Chinese American, Japanese American, and Korean American peers, many of whom were enrolled in the elite magnet academies. While students stated these stereotypes of Asians and Cambodians were not true for themselves, they often applied these labels onto others:

What do people think about Cambodians in this community? Well, ghetto. I think that because there's a lot of like, well Cambodians that are gangsters, so I guess that people think that we are mostly ghetto or we don't know how to pick ourselves up or something...it's really bad to just generalize them but there's a lot of Khmer people here who look, you know, the pants are a little low and stuff, baggy pants and all that stuff. (Davy, 15, Excel Academy)

Though many Cambodian students at CHS dressed “baggy,” Cambodians who hung out with Cambodian peers and participated in non-magnet career academies were singled out as “ghetto” or looking like a “gangster.” Interestingly, Cambodian Magnet students dressed in similar ways to non-Magnet peers (i.e., oversized shirts and sagging jeans) that was consistent with urban hip hop fashion, but were rarely labeled as ghetto. Rather, Cambodian Magnet students were often described as “white washed” or “sell outs” because their peer groups included White students and other Asian-background students.

Some Cambodian youth stated that they were outside of the dichotomous view of Cambodian students. For example, during the first few weeks at CHS the first author (Chhuon) met a librarian's aide named Thomas, a senior in the Communications

academy. When Thomas heard that a study on Cambodian students was being conducted, he graciously offered to give Chhuon a tour of the school. Thomas added that while he identified as Cambodian, he believed that he did not fit the typical image of Cambodian students at CHS. For example, he dressed in mostly black clothing, wore tight denim jeans, and had a “punk rock” style mohawk haircut. Most of his friends were also Cambodian and dressed similarly. But Thomas explained that he and his friends were clearly a minority relative to other Cambodian students at CHS. The following is a field note excerpt of the campus tour:

As we walked down the hallway into the main quad area, Thomas explained that their group was less “ghetto” than other Cambodians at the school. When asked for clarification, he said that his group wasn’t loud, nor do they think it’s cool to not care about school. He pointed to a group of Cambodians near the library whom he called “gangsters” and “wannabes”. These Cambodian students were considered “ghetto”. We next walked by the stage. These Cambodians, “the preppies” hang out with Whites and Chinese because they’re Magnet, I was told. These Cambodian students, according to Lilly, Thomas’s friend, “all think they’re going somewhere.” They “act White”. When asked what made the preppies so different, Thomas explained, “we’re all Asian but we’re in the “regular academics.” They viewed the preppy Cambodians with disdain. (field note, 1-18-08)

As indicated by the excerpt above, Cambodian students’ identities and social categories were sensitive to their placement in their school’s academic hierarchy, as organized by its schools-within-schools structure. For Thomas and his friends, Cambodian students were either supposed to fit into the “smart” image of Asians, consistent with the model minority stereotype, or they were part of the “ghetto” Asians that did not care about school. Thomas and Lilly’s assertions suggested that they were aware of the rigid binary images that existed for Cambodians students at CHS but that they belonged to neither. They emphasized that they were an exception to these common perceptions.

Cambodian students shared explanations for why this duality existed. For example, the researcher often engaged in lunchtime conversations with Cambodian students hanging out in front of the library (as Thomas pointed out toward during the campus tour). These youth (almost all of whom participated in Career academies) were proud of their Cambodian identity. Though Cambodian students in the Career academies were viewed as low achieving, students suggested that at least they maintained their ethnic integrity. During one lunch period, one young man, Arun, explained why his Career academy is considered “ghetto.” He said “If the people around us treat us that way [ghetto] then that’s how we’re going to be. Like, you know, those up on that stage [pointing to Cambodian Magnet students across the quad], they get treated better by everybody here. That’s why they do better. But they’re White-washed.” Arun’s explanation suggested a type of self-fulfilling prophecy that characterized his academic experience. Another student, James, overheard the conversation and chimed in, “Security guards don’t send those Asians to [detention] when they late to school! We’re like the bad Asians I guess.”

Cambodian students from the Career academies were critical of how teachers and other school personnel treated them suggesting that their behaviors were simply consistent with the messages they received from institutional agents at the school. These youth believed that some Cambodian students are more successful academically, referring to those in the Magnet academies, in large part because they receive considerable academic attention from their teachers and counselors.

To summarize, a dual perception of Cambodian students existed at CHS, where one label, typically associated with Asian American panethnicity, was linked to high achievement whereas a Cambodian ethnicity often meant that one was poor, low achieving and “ghetto”. Cambodian Magnet students were also characterized as “White-wash” or “selling out” by their Cambodian peers from the Career academies. These findings resonate with the “acting White” literature (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Ogbu and Simons 1998) that suggests some ethnic minority students must adopt an adversarial stance toward school or endure acting White taunts from their peers. However, these charges of cultural treason, as those levied by Lilly and James, derive less from Cambodian Magnet students’ higher academic performance but primarily from their membership in elite CHS academies and consequently, participation in diverse peer groups that consisted of primarily East Asian-background and White American students. For their part, Cambodian Magnet students also generally spoke in unfavorable terms about their Cambodian peers in the Career academies. For instance, Molika explained that “I get kinda tired of it sometimes because the Khmer kids here [at CHS] are getting into something always and make us look bad.” While Molika used “us” to describe Cambodian youth broadly, the students she referred to were largely those Cambodian students from the Career academies. In short, Molika and other Cambodian magnet students typically held their Cambodian peers from less selective academies in low regard socially and academically and often relied on stereotypical views of Cambodians that were circulated in their school and community.

Cambodian Students Across Schools-within-Schools

The SWS model at CHS aimed to create smaller and more personalized environments designed to prevent students from falling through the cracks. Our findings suggests that parallel to the tracking policies that existed prior to the reform, certain Schools-within-Schools (SWSs) at CHS quickly gained reputations for academic rigor and attracted mostly academically strong students, particularly those Magnet academies with a competitive application process and strong college preparatory emphases. As a result, Cambodian students in Career academies shared that they are treated as second class students and are considered “leftovers” from those not admitted into Magnet academies. From their perspective, unless students in the Career academies were personally motivated and resourceful, they were likely to fall between the cracks of the school. One young woman in the Business academy, Shawna, explained it like this: “Well, the teachers in my academy, I think they pretty much just want us to pass and graduate. Because even in my academy we have a low rate of graduation so they was like well they just want us to graduate and stuff. But I’m trying to get to college too. Because when like I would talk to my

counselor and stuff she wasn't much help to me." These student informants believe that while some teachers make an effort to genuinely help their students, many teachers do not care and are only teaching because it is their job. The following from Christine is further emblematic of how Cambodian youth felt about the Career academies:

Counselors come around a year before and ask you what you want your classes to be. So I had already signed up for journalism, speech communication, you know all the stuff that's going to go with my career. And I didn't even get any of that....I ended up getting messed up the rest of the semester because I had honors classes and you can't just switch your schedule. So I ended up being messed up because of that....Some of my friends happen to be in [Excel academy] and I can see the difference right away. Their teachers try to do more to help them to get more ahead. Even when it comes to scheduling classes; they get to schedule first. They get certain classes that in my academy people aren't even allowed to take. Like we can't take Chinese. They won't let us. (Christine, 17, Communications Academy)

To be sure, lower expectations and fewer resources in Career academies were experienced by students from other ethnic backgrounds as well as Cambodian students in the "lower" academies. However, Cambodian students in these academies were in an especially precarious position because they often experienced a double perception by staff and peers in school. They were subject to both ethnic specific negative stereotypes and the panethnic model minority stereotype. Cambodian students' were faced with ethnic identity issues that shaped how they might be seen and treated. Gina, an eleventh grade Humanities student, explained the contradiction like this: "That stereotype is probably like something that helps us....because like last week this girl was like 'C'mon, just help me do this, you all are all smart.' I don't think I'm smart but she did. I'm *okay* in math but I still got to try hard. And I like what you were asking about earlier, I know she was acting like that because they think the Asians are all smart (laughter)." Gina and other Cambodian students knew that they were not more intelligent than their classmates, but they acknowledged the benefit related to the idea that "Asians are all smart" as propagated by non-Asian American classmates who were primarily African American and Latino peers. In class, this perception led to Cambodian students being asked by their peers them in group work and for help on assignments. This was especially true for non-magnet Cambodian students in math class, a subject that Asian Americans were stereotypically expected to excel in. Hence, Cambodian Career academy students' academic experiences were influenced by whether others viewed them through a stigmatized ethnic label such as Cambodian, or through a positive distortion represented by the model minority stereotype.

Our findings suggest that the perceptions of Cambodian students in elite Magnet academies differed significantly from those in the less selective Career academies. Cambodian students in the Magnet academies tend to be perceived panethnically by their teachers and some of their peers. Many Magnet students complained that were frustrated by the lack of recognition of their ethnic background by teachers and students. Panethnic identities associated with "Asian-ness", as Lee termed earlier,

meant that they were bright and hardworking, consistent with the model minority image. In particular, Cambodian students complained about the common assumptions that all phenotypically Asian students were “Chinese.” For example, Lilly remarked about the environment in her Magnet classes, “Yeah well, they, when everyone here think of you as an Asian race, they think you’re Chinese, they think everybody’s Chinese! So....they already think you’re smart.” In this way, being Chinese was equated with being Asian, hence a high achiever. The academic prestige of Magnet academies influenced people’s expectations and reactions to Cambodian students. For example, one 11th grader, Ratana, shared that other students viewed him as “an exception” after learning he was Cambodian. Ratana was noticeably annoyed during his interview when he stated:

When people ask me what am I and I say Cambodian they get all surprised! It’s like, I don’t know, like I’m an exception or something. I guess, like, the Cambodians aren’t suppose to be smart or something. Well, I am smart but it’s like I’m supposed to be in the lower classes. And then they always say like “Oh I thought you were Chinese or Filipino.” They think all the Asians are from China!...It’s everybody. My teachers too sometimes.

Cambodian youth reported that their peers and teachers were genuinely surprised to learn of their ethnicity because Cambodian students at CHS were not expected to be in the Magnet academies. Brenda, a Commerce student, similarly complained about her teachers: “Because you know, sometimes they can’t tell us Asians apart. When they know that I’m Cambodian, they’d be like “Wow.” All surprised, you know? Cause there’s not a lot of us in [the Magnet academies]” Not surprisingly, Magnet teachers knew that there were many Cambodian students at CHS but were usually unable to identify Cambodian students in their own classes.

When asked about their experiences teaching Cambodian students’, Magnet teachers frequently turned to discussing Asian students as a whole. In fact, Magnet teachers rarely acknowledged that Asian-descent students in their classes, including Cambodians, come from differing cultural backgrounds. For instance, after explaining the purpose of the study, one Magnet science teacher responded: “Well, to be honest, all of my Asian students are doing fine so I don’t know how much of a help I would be.” Magnet teachers explained that they did not know which students identified as Cambodian. The following field note excerpt is indicative of the conversations held with Magnet faculty about Cambodian students at CHS:

After second period I spoke with Mr. Emmons, a Commerce math teacher. I explained to him that the purpose of my research was to understand ways to help Cambodian youth do better in school. He said that he didn’t think he could be of much help to me because he wouldn’t know who is Cambodian or not. He explained that “I don’t see race or ethnicity in my class” but that he did have many Asian students in his classes. I asked him if some these students were Cambodian and he said “Maybe, but I wouldn’t know” (field note, 2-21-08).

With respect to ethnicity, there were sharp contrasts between Cambodian students’ internal self-identification and Magnet teachers’ external ascription of Cambodian

students. Because school is an important site for students' identity formation (Davidson 1996), the ways in which teachers recognize or not recognize students' cultural identities had consequences for students' academic well being. For instance, 11 of the 23 Magnet students that were individually interviewed brought up this issue when discussing their classroom experiences. Teachers' lumping of Cambodians into a broad "Asian" category reflected Cambodian Magnet students' cultural invisibility in academically challenging classes. For example, another Magnet teacher explained that while he did not recognize who was Cambodian in his classes, he felt that Cambodian students did not stand out because of a lack of "cultural identity." Unlike the Chinese and Pacific Islanders at the school, he explained, Cambodians in the school and its surrounding community were not proactive in promoting their ethnic heritage. Ironically, CHS is physically located in the largest Cambodian community in the U.S., as mentioned earlier. The neighborhood streets are lined with Cambodian businesses including auto repair shops, jewelry stores, ethnic grocery stores, and restaurants. Nevertheless, Mr. Wright commented:

Yeah. I just think, they are just, I think they're [Cambodian students] sort of struggling as find some sort of cultural identity. I mean it's sort of hard to, you know, whereas you got the Chinese. They got their, well they seem to have a very well defined sense of culture. It's very cohesive but Cambodian kids in the Magnet Programs, well they kind of fit into the good stereotype of Asians. But it's hard to tell who and what is Cambodian. Although the Cambodian kids even look a little different a lot of the time too; they tend to be darker.

However, our Cambodian Magnet student informants typically had similar skin tones to other Asian American students in their classes. Hence, Mr. Wright relied on stereotypical assumptions about the physical differences between Cambodians and other Asian American students.

In contrast to Cambodian students in Magnet programs, the ethnic background of Cambodian students in Career academies was considerably more visible to teachers. Teachers in the Career academies had few problems identifying and discussing the problems of Cambodian students in their classes. These courses enrolled many Cambodian students every year and teachers were explicit in describing the struggles of Cambodian students in their classes. Teachers often cited Asian cultural values as contributors to Asian American students' success while noting that Cambodian students' lower performance were due to home and cultural deficiencies. One English teacher for example, Ms. Jacobs, put it like this: "I think that's part of the Asian culture, that emphasis on education and success, part of their family values....I don't think that the Cambodian students in my first period class get help, you know, support from the parents." Like most teachers, Ms. Jacobs discussed Cambodian students by comparing them to successful Asian students. Cambodian students' ethnic backgrounds were visible in those contexts where academic expectations tend to be low and students perceived as less motivated. In her interview, one administrator suggested that Cambodian students at CHS were broadly categorized as difficult students. She stated:

You know it's an interesting thing but the Asians here are really, really bright, you know what I mean? So I'm not sure that perception has to do with the fact that they're Asians but there are differences in their [test] scores. Our student [government] is mostly Asians, have you noticed that?... But we also have some of our little Asian gangbangers in our [Career] academies. Those ones are Cambodians mostly, probably. You wouldn't find them in Excel, they [Excel students] don't have time to gangbang. They're home studying all the time.

Asian American students involved in student government and other extra-curricular activities represented teachers' conceptions of ideal CHS students. Conversely, Cambodian students as a separate ethnic group were often problematized by CHS teachers and administrators as lower achievers and "little Asian gangbangers", particularly vis-a-vis "bright" Asian American students. The general discourse on Cambodian students at CHS revolved around being academic strugglers or "ghetto", and in relation to smart and high achieving East Asian-background peers. Consequently, many Cambodian students enrolled in less selective programs reported feelings of neglect and discrimination from school adults. When Cambodian students were discussed specifically, they were described by school adults as not receiving home support, lacking appropriate values, and as gang members.

In short, the ethnic identities of Cambodian students were highly visible to teachers in the less selective Career academies while the ethnic background of Cambodian students across elite Magnet programs usually went unrecognized by teachers. Many Cambodian students were bothered by how their Magnet teachers only made reference to certain Asian American experiences in school. Whereas they often referred to Chinese and Japanese cultural mores as explanation for Asian students' large representation across the Magnet academies, Cambodian students were either lumped into these groups or not discussed entirely. Equating Cambodian students' ethnic background with being Chinese, for example, suggests that Cambodian Magnet students' ethnic identities were neglected in favor of a safer and more convenient label consistent with the model minority conception of Asian American students. While Cambodian youth in Magnet academies generally fared well academically, our data suggests that many may come to accept this stereotype at the cost of their ethnic identity. The internalization of an essentializing, albeit positive, view of Asian Americans can over time encourage these adolescents to develop negative feelings toward their own ethnic group.

Conclusion

Our findings respond to educational research that presents the model minority concept of Asian American students as a fixed notion and insufficiently attends to the school context in which this stereotype is constructed and imposed. These data suggest that for a unique ethnic group such as Cambodian students, the model minority construct is imposed on them at the expense of their Cambodian identities. That is, ethnic and panethnic identities (as bound up with the model minority

stereotype) at CHS represented a zero-sum gain for Cambodian students. What some might consider complimentary for Cambodian students was actually a severe critique of the majority of Cambodian students who did not participate in elite academies.

Our findings suggested that a Cambodian identity was often considered a stigmatized label at CHS. Cambodian students' identities in the less selective Career academies were often quite visible to teachers. Students identified as Cambodian were essentialized into the discourse of urban low achieving and culturally deficient minority student. This characterization was often coupled with a panethnic representation of Asian American students in higher academies who were motivated and supported by advantageous home and cultural values. Even when asked explicitly about Cambodians at CHS and in their classes, Magnet teachers preferred to discuss Cambodian students in panethnic terms and tend to describe their Cambodian students as part of their "bright Asian students" group.

Other research refers to this common type of dialogue as a "race talk dilemma" whereby educators struggle to talk honestly about race and ethnicity in education (Pollock 2001, 2004). This difficulty was perhaps in part due to the fact that a Cambodian-identified researcher was asking questions about the teaching of Cambodian students in their classes and the underrepresentation of this group in the school's elite programs. Magnet academy teachers were seeking to avoid making remarks about Cambodian students' ethnic backgrounds while at the same time emphasizing the notion of hard working Asian American students. As Pollock (2001) contends, these practices "risk making racial achievement patterns in our schools seem normal both by talking about them matter-of-factly, and by refusing to talk about them at all" (p. 9). This was certainly true for Magnet teachers as they underscored the achievements of Asian American students while overlooking the experiences of Cambodian students in their classes. Some institutional agents, including teachers and administrators, also referred to the researcher's graduate student status as evidence that hard work does pay off as well as to rationalize that ethnicity was a largely irrelevant issue in their academy. However, ethnicity was a *primary* issue because their remarks suggested that the researcher appeared to be an exception to their perception of Cambodian students at CHS. Moreover, it seem that discussing the idea of "Asian" students was a safer conversation because talking about the underrepresentation of Cambodian students can feel like an acknowledgement that institutional exclusion of some ethnic groups exist. This awareness might contradict Magnet teachers' belief in the meritocracy of the selective academies in which they teach.

As well, this study found that Career academy students often labeled their Magnet peers as "White-wash" because of their disappointment with Cambodian peers who they felt did not want to associate with members of their ethnic group. However, these labels were often in the context of Cambodian Magnet students' membership in the elite academies and their subsequent affiliation with White and East Asian students within those academies. Hence, school placement and perceived academic hierarchies were intricately embedded within students' "White-wash" and "selling out" charges. It is possible that these epithets would be less frequent if the Magnet academies enrolled more Cambodian students, as consistent with recent

research with African American students that found that “acting White” accusations were more common in schools where African American students were underrepresented in high-track classes (Carter 2006; Tyson et al. 2005). High achieving African American youth attending schools in which there was proportionate representation of African American students did not suffer from those taunts. These within-group racial and ethnic tensions appear to be in part a product of the rigid academic stratification present at CHS and many high schools. Unfortunately, students enrolled in the most selective programs and academies often did not reflect the diversity of the school community. These identity tensions can be ameliorated by school leaders making it their explicit goal to include underserved groups including Cambodian students in all programs.

To unearth how Asian American identities are employed and constrained in schools require familiarity with the social context and its actors. This study argues for further ethnographic research on how identities are understood and imposed. To better appreciate the consequences of ethnic identities one must examine the everydayness of these identities (O'Connor et al. 2007). Listening to the voices of marginalized minority youth, such as Cambodian students, can powerfully inform researchers, educators, and policymakers about teaching, equity, and school reform (Cook-Sather 2002).

In summary, this research contributes to a small but growing literature about the disaggregated experiences of Cambodian students, a rapidly-growing population in U.S. schools (Reeves and Bennett 2004). Specifically, our findings extend other works on Asian American ethnicity and panethnicity (Espiritu 1992; Vo 2004) by focusing on the dual identities that affect the schooling of Cambodian students. These analyses complicate further the static notion of Asian American students as model minorities by emphasizing the fluid, problematic, and contextually-based nature of the construct. Although some of the recent research in education on the model minority stereotype has offered a more complex conceptualization of the construct (Lew 2006; Louie 2004; Ngo and Lee 2007), we argue that there is still much work to be done for capturing more fully the meaning and consequences of these identities for students' school lives.

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